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Christina Isabelli

*Illinois Wesleyan University*, [cisabell@iwu.edu](mailto:cisabell@iwu.edu)

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# Development of Oral Communication Skills Abroad

**Christina L. Isabelli-García**

*Illinois Wesleyan University*

This study examines the impact of a semester study abroad experience in Argentina on the second language acquisition of three American university Spanish learners. The goal is to measure development of two aspects of oral communication skills: fluency and performance in the oral functions of narration, and description and supporting an opinion.

Research has shown that immersion in the target culture is of great value to the learner's second-language acquisition, especially in improvement of oral proficiency (Freed, 1990a, 1990b; 1995a, 1995b; Ginsberg & Miller, 2000; Liskin-Gasparro & Urdaneta, 1995). Other study abroad research has focused on various aspects of acquisition such as sociolinguistic norms, lexical items, pronunciation and communication strategies, among others. Freed (1995a) points out that even though "previous investigations have laid the groundwork for fruitful explorations of the effects of study abroad experiences on the language proficiency of those who participate in these programs...numerous questions remain to be answered by carefully-controlled empirical studies" (p. 16). One of the many theoretical and practical questions she asks concerns the actual linguistic benefits of time spent in a study abroad program. She poses the question about what these benefits might be, "Is it improved accent, greater use of idioms, improved accuracy, expanded discourse strategies, greater fluency, improved listening comprehension, improved oral or written communication, greater syntactic complexity, or broader sociolinguistic range?" (p.17). I approach the issue by analyzing two of Freed's topics of study: the learner's improved fluency, and improved oral communication skills in language functions throughout the study abroad program.

The term "fluency" is not easily defined, and it is not the purpose of the study to attempt that feat (see Freed 1995a for a discussion on fluency).

Rather, I use the definition put forth by the well-defined scoring criteria of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) *Proficiency Guidelines* (1986). Fluency, here, is defined as: 1) quantity of speech or length of the learner's utterance per response, 2) "flow" of the learner's speech measured by pauses, and, 3) evidence of struggle with the language. For example, an intermediate speaker's fluency is characterized by extreme to frequent hesitation, extreme brevity and long pauses. On the other hand, an advanced speaker's speech sample generally flows with occasional hesitation and a moderate quantity of speech.

The term "oral communication skills" covers a gamut of abilities. For the purposes of this study I define oral communication skills as the use of specific speech functions by the non-native speaker, and I use the ACTFL speaking guidelines to further refine this definition. These guidelines consist of four categories, each with its own details: context, content, function and accuracy. For the purpose of this study, focus was placed on function since, according to Galloway, function "is perhaps the most crucial element in oral proficiency assessment. If the speaker cannot combine linguistic resources to perform communicative tasks, explicit knowledge of grammar and vocabulary is of questionable value." (1987: 30)

The continuum that Galloway claims as an indicator of developing proficiency includes three functions: narrating in the past, giving descriptions, and supporting an opinion. Development occurs when the learner moves from: (1) listing occurrences to telling a story, meshing the descriptive background with the sequential recounting of events; (2) identifying discrete elements to providing the sensorial richness and explicitness of description; and (3) stating a simple opinion to providing cohesive and coherent arguments in support of that opinion. These lengthy descriptions are summarized in the following three function categories: (1a) simple narration (report); (1b) detailed narration (story); (2a) simple description; (2b) detailed description; (3a) giving an opinion; and (3b) supporting an opinion. The communicative tasks of narrating, describing, hypothesizing and supporting an opinion are functions that the average study abroad learner is unable to complete in an adequate manner.

Numerous study abroad researchers use an oral proficiency test to evaluate learners' development before and after the study abroad program, which assumes that the student is progressing linearly. But language development does not occur linearly and often is characterized as having

instances of seemingly declining performance, or “backsliding.” That is, a grammatical item or narrative task may not prove difficult to the student, say, early in a study abroad program, but it may later on. Therefore, the proficiency score of a returned student may not capture the true progress that the student has made and may lead to false assumptions about study abroad, especially if the progress seems minimal. There is little documentation that describes specific development in the learners’ oral communication skills of performing functions in discrete month-by-month observations, which is exactly what this study aims to document.

International education administrators want evidence that study abroad is beneficial. In recent years, institutions such as the University of Texas at Austin have been implementing oral-proficiency courses in outcome-based curricula, using interview tests as a requirement toward a degree. A common recommendation for those learners is to spend time abroad in hopes of developing their proficiency. It is understandable, then, that study abroad administrators and their educational institutions are curious as to what actually happens to the students’ oral communication skills while abroad. This study aims to investigate this point by addressing the research question: Do the oral communication skills of students abroad progress?

## **S u b j e c t s**

The participants for this study were selected from a group of study abroad students who were part of a consortium among three U.S. state universities participating in a program in Argentina. Although students have a two-year requirement of studying Spanish before going abroad, there is great variance in their oral-proficiency levels. The subjects, called Mark, Jennifer and Tom for anonymity, were screened and chosen based on the following criteria: (1) they did not speak or study another foreign language; (2) they had a pre-program oral-proficiency level of intermediate; and (3) they were motivated to learn Spanish, as indicated by concrete plans to continue the study of Spanish after the semester.

The language-learning environment for the participants can be characterized as dual: a weak classroom and a strong natural environment. At the sponsoring university abroad, the subjects attended a language class for a total of two hours a week that was for all international students and

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was taught exclusively in Spanish. There was no textbook but, rather, a pamphlet of “homemade” creative activities, reading excerpts and grammar. The students also attended courses in other academic areas in which they were expected to produce the same assignments as the Argentine students. These courses were taken at the sponsoring university or at two other universities in the city. The participants’ life outside the classroom varied, from significant interaction with native speakers (Tom and Mark), to limited interaction with native speakers, and activities with other English-speakers (Jennifer). Mark (age 19) and Jennifer (age 20), each lived in a home with a host-mother. Both Mark and Jennifer arrived in Argentina with intermediate-low oral communication skills. Tom (age 21) lived in an apartment with a French roommate. He arrived with an oral communication level of intermediate-mid range.

### **Data Collection**

The data for this study were derived from two sources: 1) five informal interviews in the target language, which were administered by the researcher at a monthly interval and later transcribed, and 2) a simulated oral-proficiency interview (SOPI). The informal interviews were used to elicit functions to be analyzed later for specific oral communication skills while the SOPI tested the students’ pre- and post-program proficiency performance.

The informal interview protocol included the same open-ended questions, but, depending on the direction of the interview, not all participants received exactly the same questions. The main purpose was to ask questions with a past-tense token, “What did you do yesterday/last weekend” and a future-tense token “What will you do next month/weekend.” All interviews were conducted exclusively in Spanish. These 15-minute interviews, which were recorded on an audiocassette recorder, were conducted once a month, for a total of five times over the course of the study. Function is assessed here by checking for use and degree of elaboration of descriptions and narrations. These elements were selected as being of special interest because they vary in definition depending on whether the speaker is at an intermediate or an advanced level. For example, the intermediate-level speaker produces descriptions and some narration with discrete sentences and minimal information whereas the advanced-level speaker produces

paragraph-length descriptions and narrations.

The second data-collection tool was the pre- and post-program SOPI, a performance-based speaking test that emulates the speaking section of the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI). The SOPI was chosen as a means to assess proficiency since the researcher was most familiar with the test format and criteria for grading and believed it would yield a reliable indication of oral-proficiency growth. Further, the SOPI “has shown itself to be a valid and reliable surrogate of the OPI” (Stansfield, 1990: 229). The interview used in this study was a sample SOPI prepared by the Center for Applied Linguistics for the State of Texas, the Texas Oral Proficiency Test, which is used to certify prospective elementary-and high-school Spanish and bilingual teachers for language competency.

A trained SOPI rater (the investigator of this study) scored the interviews to determine the oral-proficiency ratings of the participants. Another trained SOPI rater double-rated the interviews for reliability. The interviews then were rated according to the criteria described for the following four levels defined by ACTFL: intermediate low, intermediate mid, intermediate high and advanced. The levels are described below, following Byrnes and Canale (1987: 16-17).

The intermediate-low speaker is able to handle successfully a limited number of interactive, task-oriented and social situations. Vocabulary is adequate to express only the most elementary needs, and strong interference from the native language may occur. Misunderstandings frequently arise but, with repetition, the intermediate-low speaker can be understood, generally, by interlocutors used to dealing with speakers at this level.

The intermediate-mid speaker is able to communicate in a variety of uncomplicated, basic communicative tasks and social situations. The length of spoken statements shows an increase over that at lower levels, but speech may be characterized by frequent long pauses since the smooth incorporation of even basic conversational strategies is often hindered as the speaker struggles to create appropriate language forms. Although misunderstandings arise, listeners who are accustomed to dealing with speakers at this level generally can understand the intermediate-mid speaker.

Intermediate-high speakers are able to handle most uncomplicated communicative tasks and social situations. They can initiate and sustain general conversations with strategies appropriate to a range of circumstances and topics, but errors are evident. There is emerging evidence of

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connected discourse, particularly for simple narration and/or description. Native listeners not accustomed to dealing with speakers at this level generally can understand the intermediate-high speaker without difficulty.

The advanced speaker is able to satisfy the requirements of everyday situations such as daily routines, school and work. The advanced speaker can narrate and describe in all major time frames (past, present and future) in paragraph-length discourse, but control of aspect may be lacking at times. Circumlocution that arises from vocabulary or syntactic limitations is successful, although some groping for words may be evident. The advanced speaker can be understood by most native speakers of the language. Characteristics of a more experienced speaker of a language include high-linguistic accuracy, the ability to state and support opinions, to give detailed descriptions instead of identifying discrete elements and to tell a story instead of listing occurrences.

### **Classification and Analysis of Data for Informal Interviews**

The informal interviews were transcribed and reviewed for accuracy and were analyzed according to the following procedure. Narrative passages were identified within the dialogue between the participant and the interviewer. They then were categorized and tallied respectively by the type of function as listed by Galloway (1987:30) and as previously described.

As described above, the continuum that Galloway claims as an indicator of developing proficiency includes three functions; two are used in this study. According to Galloway, development has occurred in the functions of narrating in the past and giving descriptions when the learner moves from: (1) listing occurrences to telling a story, meshing the descriptive background with the sequential recounting of events and (2) identifying discrete elements to providing the sensorial richness and explicitness of description. These lengthy descriptions are summarized in the following function categories: (1a) simple narration (report); (1b) detailed narration (story); (2a) simple description and (2b) detailed description. These elements were selected as being particularly appropriate for this study because they vary in definition depending on whether the speaker is at an intermediate or an advanced level. For example, the intermediate-level

speaker produces descriptions and some narration with discrete sentences and minimal information, whereas the advanced-level speaker produces paragraph-length descriptions and narrations. The categories are explained in the following subsections.

### Narration: Simple and Detailed

Simple narration also has been labeled as “report” in past studies. Based on Polanyi’s (1982: 515) definition, a report tells only what happened “and may give some contextualizing information as well, setting the actions in a location and describing who was involved with their occurrence ... [giving] a picture of what went on during a particular period,” without explaining “why those events took place and why they are considered to be worth reporting,” as in a story. The participant in (1), below, for example, listed where she went, with whom she traveled and how long the trip took.

(1) Simple Narration

I: ¿Fuiste de vacaciones? {...}

P: Sí. Yo fui a Iguazú y ... también ... fuimos a un ... pueblo de Paraguay y ... unas ruinas de una iglesia en ... la provincia de Misiones. Yo fui con Elsa, Manuel, Fred y Gabriela. Y había un viaje en, era dieciocho horas en el colectivo.

I: *Did you go on vacation?* {...}

P: *Yes. I went to Iguazú and ... also ... we went to a ... town in Paraguay and ... some church ruins in ... the province of Misiones. I went with Elsa, Manuel, Fred and Gabriela. And there was a trip in, it was 18 hours in a bus.*

This narrative passage was classified as simple narration since it tells what happened with minimal information and does not include descriptive background information that explains why it took place.

The following narrative (2) was classified as a detailed narration or “story.” It was considered a definite past-time narrative that the learner evaluated in such a way that the story recipients understood the “point” in telling the story. According to Polanyi (1982: 516), a story is told “to make a point, to transmit a message, often with some sort of moral about the world that one shares with the other people present.” Evaluation occurs in stories; that is, the learner

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*includes meta-information throughout his (or her) telling of the story, which indicates the differential weight he (or she) assigns to the various states and events in the story. Some information thus emerges as more salient than others, with regard to the message the speaker is trying to convey (Polanyi, 1982: 516).*

In excerpt (2), the participant tells a story to the interviewer in order to make a point that some immigrants in the United States cannot always be believed. The first part of the excerpt is told to set up the story.

(2) Detailed Narration

P: [...] Yo le dije [to his French roommate], hay racismo, hay problemas pero no es tan grande, no es como vos, vos crees. Porque yo tengo que, vos tenés tu derecho de uh cree lo que vos querés pero yo tengo que decir como, porque yo vive, yo vivo en los Estados Unidos. No es tan malo como vos pensás. Y él [his French roommate] uh, él leyó un artículo sobre la, el haitian que los, la policía uh en Nueva York yo creo, ellos uh, uh golpearon y [...] y ellos “sodomized”...esto es lo que el haitian está diciendo. [...] Primero, vos no sabés si esto es la verdad porque, porque uh es posible que el haitian es, esto pasó, o es posible que él está diciendo mentiras porque él quiere dinero de la, de la ciudad o algo así. Y por eso tenés que leer con cuidado, no es posible leer todos los cosas y creen en todos los cosas. Tenés que leer bien.

[...] Porque en Florida [...] yo trabajo [...] en los departamentos de muchos haitians y, yo oí cuentos de mi cuñado y el vecino de mi cuñado de haitians que siempre están en los coches y EERrr, ellos pararon muy rápido para [ ] el coche [slaps hands together] después o atrás para uh, hace un uh accidente. Y ellos reciben dinero or un, alguna vez el vecino de mi cuñado, es un uh bombero, y ellos llegaron a un accidente y habían cuatro haitians en el coche sin un uh sin un problema con el coche, no, pero el coche atrás había pe, pegado or al coche y por eso ellos no, no cambiaron la posición, “¡Oh, yo, no, no puedo mover, no puedo mover!” [...] y no había nada malo con el coche, el coche perfectamente. Por eso, no fue posible que el coche atrás pegó muy, muy rápido y por eso

ellos tienen, los bomberos tienen que usar uh *the Jaws of Life*...Y ellos destruyeron, destruyeron todo el coche para uh mover la gente porque “oh, oh.” Y todo esas cosas.

*P: I told him (his French roommate), there is racism, there are problems but it is not as big, it is not like you think. Because I have to, you have your right to believe what you want but I have to say how because I live in the U.S. It is not as bad as you think. And he (his French roommate) read an article about the Haitian that the police in New York I think, they uh, uh bit and (...) they sodomized...this is what the Haitian is saying. (...) First, you do not know if this is true because, because it is possible that the Haitian is, if this happened, or it is possible that he is telling lies because he wants money from the, from the city or something like that. And that is why you have to read carefully, it is not possible to read everything and believe in everything. You have to read carefully.*

*(...) Because in Florida (...) I work (...) in the apartments of many Haitians and, I heard stories from my brother-in-law and my brother-in-law's neighbor about Haitians that always are in the cars and EERrrr, they stopped very fast for ( ) the car (slaps hands together) after or behind to uh, make an uh accident. And they receive money or an, one time my brother-in-law's neighbor, he's a uh firefighter, and they arrived at an accident and there were four Haitians in the car without an uh without a problem with the car, no, but the car behind had stu, struck or the car and so they didn't, didn't change the position. “Oh, I, can't, I can't move, I can't move” (...) and there wasn't anything wrong with the car, the car perfectly. And so, it wasn't possible that the car behind struck very, very fast and so they have, the firefighters have to use uh *the Jaws of Life* ... And they destroyed, destroyed the entire car to uh move the people because “oh oh.” And all those things.*

This sample was considered a detailed narration, a story, since the participant was trying to make the point of why he thought it was important to know the whole story behind a situation before drawing any conclusions. In this case, the learner was upset that his French roommate had made a generalization concerning American racism based on a separate incident involving a Haitian. He tells a story in which he tries to make the point that sometimes people lie to make situations look worse that

they really are, and he conveys the message that this incident irritated him, a trait that is found in storytelling (Liskin-Gasparro, 1993).

### Description: Simple and Detailed

Descriptions in this study are non-story narratives, which include: “plans, the simultaneous reporting of what is happening in an on-going situation and descriptions of wished-for but not yet realized occurrences” (Polanyi, 1982: 511). A narrative passage that exemplifies the function of simple description, in which the participant described to the interviewer her plans for the following week, is seen in the following:

#### (3) Simple Description

I: ...uh quiero saber lo que vas a hacer después...de esa semana.

P: Bueno. Ya te digo que um jueves mis padres vienen y vamos a un viaje al sur en...Península Valdes. Vamos a alquilar un auto y, y ir para ver uh ballenas y ¿pingüinos?

I: Pingüinos.

P: Pingüinos, y...después um cuando revolvemos a Buenos Aires, Jane y yo um nos vamos a un viaje al...uh...muchos partes de Sud América y [laughs] el quince de diciembre, me voy a Colorado.

*I: uh I want to know what you are going to do after...this week.*

*P: I already tell you that um Thursday my parents are coming and we are going on a trip to the south in...the Valdes Peninsula. We are going to rent a car, and are going to see um whales and, penguins?*

*I: Penguins.*

*P: Penguins, and...after when we return to Buenos Aires, Jane and I are going on a trip to...many parts of South America and (laughs) the fifteenth of December, I am going to Colorado.*

It is clear here that the participant described to the interviewer her plans to travel outside Buenos Aires by providing discrete elements about her trip. This excerpt was classified as a simple description because the participant did not provide any elaboration about her plans.

On the other hand, when there is elaboration and explicitness of description, the narrative is classified as a detailed-description function. An example can be seen in (4), in which the participant explains his opinion of study abroad.

(4) Detailed Description

[...] Entonces, ah no sé...porque...porque todo el mundo que hace intercambio...siempre es como, "Sí, es una experiencia buenísimo," pero no aprendí nada de, de los cursos y...estas cosas. Pero está bien, es sólo un semestre. Bueno, estoy feliz que no quedo en esta situación por un semestre más. No me gustaría uh ir a Salvador por más tiempo. Estoy harto, estoy harto con la universidad. Pero, me gustaría hacer una práctica como los franceses hacen acá...después de un semestre de estudios. Pero es, no sé, cómo uh cómo puedo hacerlo. Pero quiero, quiero terminar mis...estudios ahora con mis amigos, quiero graduarme con mis amigos. Por eso, por eso yo quiero, quiero volver para, para estar en, con todo. Y también, bueno, si yo quedo un semestre más, tengo que hacer más de cuatro años en la universidad. Y no quiero hacer más de cuatro años en la universidad.

*{...} so, uh I don't know...because...because everyone that goes abroad...is always like, "Yes, it's an extremely good experience," but I didn't learn anything from, from the classes and...these things. But it's ok, it is just one semester. Well, I am happy that I am not staying in this situation for another semester. I wouldn't like to uh attend Salvador for a longer time. I am fed up, am fed up with that college. But, I would like to do an internship like the French do here...after one semester of studies. But it's, I don't know, how uh how I can do it. But I want, I want to finish my...studies now with my friends, I want to graduate with my friends. Therefore, therefore I want, I want to return to, to be in, with everything. And also, well, if I stay another semester, I have to do more than four years of college. I don't want to do more than four years of college.*

In addition to classifying the narrative passages into the previously mentioned functional categories (simple/detailed description, simple/detailed narration), the investigator used the appearance of the functions to mark instances of when the learner performed at a SOPI proficiency level. I do not attempt to infer an overall SOPI level via the informal interviews; rather, I use the markers to indicate when, during the stay abroad, the learner attempted more difficult functions.

As an additional measure of the development of oral-language skills, the learners' fluency also was assessed. To measure the quantity of speech of the learners' responses to the interviewer's questions, the number of words

in each response was tallied and a mean for each interview was calculated. “Flow” of the speech sample was calculated with frequency counts of the number of times the learner hesitated with ‘uh’ or ‘um,’ the typical English-language tokens for discourse fillers. Learners were considered to be struggling with the language if they: (a) oscillated between verb forms (*Y me diga, le digo a él*, “And he tells me, I tell him”); and (b) asked the interviewer for the verb form or lexical item (*dormimos afuera la hosteria esta noche porque uh hubo una ...curfew, no sé, ¿cómo se dice?* “We slept outside of the youth hostel that night because there was a ... curfew, I don’t know, how do you say it?”). These instances of struggling with the language were calculated using frequency counts for each interview.

The only statistical calculations that were performed on the data were frequency counts and means and the results are presented in the tables below that serve as a descriptive analysis of the learners’ performance

## Results

Each participant’s five oral-narrative samples were examined for development in oral communication skills (OCS). Tables 1 through 4 show the learners’ pre- and post-program fluency and functioning, including simple narration/description and detailed narration/description. Fluency is defined here by the number of words per response, number of pauses per utterance and number of times the learner struggled with the language. As previously discussed, one of the measures used in this study was a SOPI that was given to the learners at the beginning and end of their study abroad experience. Table 1 shows the ratings each participant received at these times:

*Table 1. Simulated Oral Proficiency Interview Ratings*

|          | Pre-program SOPI | Post-program SOPI |
|----------|------------------|-------------------|
| Tom      | Intermediate-mid | Intermediate-high |
| Mark     | Intermediate-low | Intermediate-high |
| Jennifer | Intermediate-mid | Intermediate-mid  |

All learners except one showed improvement in their simulated oral proficiency interviews. Tom showed a difference of one level between interviews, Mark showed a difference of two levels and Jennifer remained at the

same proficiency level as when she started.

### Individual Progress in Oral Communication Skills

#### *Tom*

Tom’s oral proficiency in Spanish was rated intermediate-mid at the beginning of the session and intermediate high-five months later. At the beginning of the program Tom’s speech samples included English and non-target-language forms and content was often unclear and disjointed. By months three, four and five, his responses became longer and he struggled less, as noted in Table 2.

**Table 2. Tom’s Communication Skills over Five Months**

| Month | Fluency                      |                     |                              | Frequency of Functions Attempted |    |    |    |
|-------|------------------------------|---------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------------|----|----|----|
|       | mean # of words per response | # of pauses tallied | # of times struggled tallied | SN                               | SD | DN | DD |
| 1     | 42.5                         | 14                  | 4                            | 0                                | 5  | 0  | 1  |
| 2     | 35.9                         | 39                  | 3                            | 1                                | 1  | 0  | 1  |
| 3     | 22                           | 11                  | 0                            | 1                                | 3  | 0  | 0  |
| 4     | 39                           | 7                   | 0                            | 1                                | 1  | 1  | 0  |
| 5     | 46                           | 12                  | 0                            | 0                                | 1  | 4  | 1  |

*Key: SN=Simple Narration, SD=Simple Description, DN=Detailed Narration, DD=Detailed Description*

At month three he averaged 22 words per response, at month four the average rose to 39, and, by month five, he produced 46 words per response on average.

From the beginning of his stay abroad, Tom used functions that normally characterize intermediate-high discourse (simple narration and simple description) to talk about his experiences. The characteristic that changed in his OCS during the five months was the number of times he attempted more difficult functions, which include using detailed narration and detailed description. During the first month, Tom’s speech had five occurrences of simple description and one detailed description, showing that he used an advanced function once. At month four, Tom used one

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simple narration, one simple description and one detailed narration, peaking two times to the advanced level. By month five, Tom used one simple description, one detailed description and four detailed narrations, using advanced-level functions five times.

*Mark*

Mark showed development in his OCS in Spanish. His oral proficiency in Spanish was rated intermediate-low at the beginning of the study abroad program and intermediate-high at the end. From the data collected in the informal oral interview conducted during the first month of the study abroad program, Mark struggled to create appropriate forms, which caused his flow of speech to be marked with frequent hesitation. As can be seen in Table 3, the length of his responses tended to be brief. During his first interview, there were six moments in which Mark struggled with the language. The same was true in the interview in the second month, but a decrease was seen in the following months, in which two difficulties were noted for month three, one in month four and none in month five.

As Mark became more secure in producing verb forms, the number of words and flow of his speech also improved. The number of words for each response on the average was calculated to be 8.3 words during the interview in month one.

*Table 3. Mark's Communication Skills over Five Months*

| Month | Fluency                      |                     |                              | Frequency of Functions Attempted |    |    |    |
|-------|------------------------------|---------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------------|----|----|----|
|       | mean # of words per response | # of pauses tallied | # of times struggled tallied | SN                               | SD | DN | DD |
| 1     | 8.3                          | 117                 | 7                            | 1                                | 2  | 0  | 0  |
| 2     | 9.7                          | 127                 | 6                            | 0                                | 2  | 0  | 0  |
| 3     | 8.9                          | 92                  | 2                            | 1                                | 1  | 0  | 0  |
| 4     | 15.5                         | 106                 | 1                            | 2                                | 1  | 1  | 0  |
| 5     | 20                           | 70                  | 0                            | 1                                | 2  | 0  | 0  |

*Key: SN=Simple Narration, SD=Simple Description, DN=Detailed Narration, DD=Detailed Description*

By month two it increased to 9.7 words, by month four it increased to 15.5 words, and by month five his utterances averaged 20 words per response. The number of hesitations followed a corresponding downward pattern, decreasing from an initial 117 pauses during the first interview, to 92 in the third and to 70 pauses by the last interview. The fact that the utterance length increased and the number of hesitations decreased during the stay abroad suggests that two elements of Mark's oral proficiency improved during this period.

Another aspect of Mark's OCS that improved during study abroad was shown in the slight increase of more difficult discourse functions such as detailed narrations. Throughout the semester Mark's discourse consisted of using simple narration and simple descriptions to relate his experiences in Argentina. It must be noted that he did not relate many narrations or descriptions, giving two or three in each interview. He did use more difficult discourse functions at month four by telling one detailed narration. For example, at month two Mark used a simple narration, a function characteristic of the intermediate level, to tell the interviewer what he had done the day before:

(5) M: Uh...uh fuimos a jugar um básquet. Ayer uh, a la club de amigos uh los hombres de mi programa uh...y después...yo fui a la fiesta de Claire, Miguel y Dave uh a su apartamento...y, es todo.

I: Muy bien. ¿Te gustó la fiesta?

M: Sí, cómo no. Hay muchas personas uh estuvieron allá que uh me gustan uh...hay uh sí, hay muchas tra, tragos, sí. Me gusta mucho de uh su apartamento. Sí.

M: *Uh...uh we went to play um basketball. Yesterday uh, at the friends' club uh the men from my program uh...and afte...I went to Claire, Miguel and Dave's party uh at their apartment...and, that's all.*

I: *Very good. Did you like the party?*

M: *Yes, of course. There are a lot of people uh they were there that uh I like them uh...there is uh yes, there are many dri, drinks, yes. I really like uh their apartment. Yes.*

Mark lists the activities he did the previous day without giving any detail or evaluative comments, saying that he played basketball with some friends and went to a party. His answers were somewhat brief and he had to be pressed for details such as if he liked the party or not. This excerpt

from month two in (5) is contrasted with excerpt (6) from his fourth month, in which the interviewer asked him a similar question about what he had done the night before.

- (6) M: Uh, no, no uh. Fuimos, fuimos a mirar el partido entre Boca y River uh...uh a la Plata. Nosotros tratamos uh obtener, comprar los boletos de River pero ellos uh, uh el estadio, no quedan los, los boletos de River. Solamente ellos tuvieron los boletos de Boca por uh setenta uh pesos.

[...]

I: Y, ¿adónde fueron a ver el partido?

M: Recoleta uh World Sports Café, ¿conocés? Sí...estuvo impresionante uh los fascinados allá en el bar. Especialmente los, los aficionados de Boca...uh...sí, estuvo divertido [...]. Uh...ellos no uh...estuvieron gritando y cantando, saltando, todo. Sí. Uh. Tuvo una...pelea un poca pelea, no, no pasó mucho.

*M: Uh, no, no uh. We went, we went to see the game between Boca and River uh...uh in the Plata stadium. We tried uh to get, to buy tickets but they uh, uh the stadium, there aren't any left of the, the River tickets. They only had the Boca tickets for uh seventy uh dollars.*

{...}

I: And, where did you go to see the game?

*M: Recoleta uh World Sports Café, do you know it? Yes, it was impressive uh the fans there in the bar. Especially, the Boca fans...uh...yes, it was fun {...}. Uh...they no uh...they were yelling and singing, jumping, everything. Yes. Uh. There was a...fight a little fight, no, not a lot happened.*

In this excerpt, illustrating a detailed narrative, Mark told the interviewer that he went to see a soccer game at a local bar between the two most popular soccer clubs in Buenos Aires, River and Boca Juniors. He provides the interviewer with more than a discrete listing of the occurrences, including explicit description of what impressed him about the soccer fans' behavior during the game. Another important aspect of giving a detailed narrative is providing background information. But in this case, both Mark and the interviewer understood that it would be a *faux pas* for him, a fan of the River team, to sit in the opposing Boca fan section even

if that was where the available seats were for a sold-out game. Therefore, instead of explaining why he went to a bar to see the game, he described the wild actions of the soccer fans in the bar.

Nonetheless, Mark showed development in his ability to give a detailed narrative in the past. Aspects of this ability can be seen in (7) from month five:

(7) M: [...] fuimos a un pueblo cerca de Corrientes, se me fue el nombre, uh...Patriajias, una cosa así. Uh... sí. Estuvo bien.

I: ¿Por cuánto tiempo fuiste?

M: Uh, el, el fin de semana uh...nada más...uh dos noches de uh camping y dos noches...de uh en micro. Uh...sí uh...pescamos y uh...yo, yo, yo no uh tuve mucha suerte pero uh mis amigos uh...uh...pescaron, pescaron...cuatro o cinco. [...] Um los peces uh estuvieron demasiado pequeño, pequeños. Pero...uh, los peces estuvieron así [shows size with hands] [...]. Tuvimos mucho suerte porque [...] encontramos uh, uh...unos tipos que uh tienen una lancha [...].”

I: [...] ¿qué tipo de pez era?

M: Uh, dorado. Es famoso acá el dorado. Sí uh...Tuvimos un pez y uh, nosotros hicimos una parilla de, de madera uh y uh cocinamos el pescado en la parilla y estuvo mucho divertido y uh, rico también.

M: {...} *we went to a town near Corrientes, the name slipped my mind, uh...Patriajias, something like that. Uh...yes. It was good.*

I: *For how long did you go?*

M: *Uh, the, the weekend uh...no more...uh two nights of uh camping and two nights...of uh in a bus. Uh...yes uh...we fished and uh...I, I, I didn't uh have a lot of luck but uh my friends uh...uh...went fishing, went fishing...four or five. {...}. Um the fish there were too small, small. But...uh, the fish were like this {shows size with hands}.... We had a lot of luck because {...} we found uh, uh...some guys that uh have boat {...}.”*

I: {...} *what type of fish was it?*

M: *Uh, dorado. The dorado is famous here. Yes uh...yes. We had a fish and uh, we made a grill from, of wood uh and uh we cooked the fish in the grill and it was lots of fun and uh, delicious too.*

Mark gave a definite past-time narrative, in which he included background information and evaluative comments so that the interviewer understood the point that was being made in telling the story. He was trying to convey to the interviewer why he was very lucky during the camping trip that he had recently taken. Mark's evaluative phrases with which he made that point, included: *estuvo bien*, *tuvimos mucho suerte porque...*, and *estuvo mucho divertido y ub, rico también (sic)*. Mark transmitted the message to the interviewer that this experience was pleasant for him. Telling a story and explaining why it is a story worth telling is a characteristic of the detailed narrative (Polanyi, 1982).

*Jennifer*

Jennifer was able to talk about herself in simple conversations such as her personal history, but she did not use more difficult discourse functions of detailed description or detailed narration to convey her experiences. Although there were instances of using the past tense to tell stories in the past, a function categorized as more difficult, she lacked paragraph-length utterances, and it was laborious for her to sustain her speech during the interviews.

In other words, she was not able to say much about her experiences. An example can be seen in the following excerpts (8) and (9), taken from an interview that took place during the last two months of the study abroad program. The interviewer asked Jennifer to tell of any interesting trips she had taken in the last month:<sup>6</sup>

(8) I: [. . .] ¿Viajaste durante este último mes?

J: Um...no. Fuimos, yo, yo sólo fui a un viaje a Iguazú...fue muy lindo.

[. . .]

I: Y, ¿cómo estuvo?

J: Um...muy, muy lejos [laughs] pasábamos um dieciocho horas en un micro y el día que uh...cuando fuimos al cataratas estaba lloviendo...y, pero fue increíble. Muy, muy impresionante las cataratas.

I: {...} *Did you travel this past month?*

J: *Um...no. We went, I, I only went on a trip to Iguazú...it was very nice.*

{...}

*I: And, how was it?*

*J: Um...very, very far {laughs} we spent eighteen hours in a bus and the day that uh...when we went to the waterfalls it was raining...and, but it was incredible. Very, very impressive the waterfalls.*

In another instance during the same interview, the interviewer asked Jennifer the same question with the purpose of eliciting more details:

(9) *I: [...] ¿Viajaste a algún lugar?*

*J: Sí, a la quinta este fin de semana con mi familia.*

*I: Y, ¿cómo estuvo?*

*J: Muy lindo. Tienen una casa y con piscina y hicimos asado afuera, y tomaron sol y...fue muy lindo. Me gustó.*

*I: {...} Did you travel somewhere?*

*J: Yes, to the country house this weekend with my family.*

*I: And, how was it?*

*J: Very nice. They have a house and with a pool and we had a barbecue outside, and they sunbathed and...it was very nice. I liked it.*

Jennifer spent a week at the impressive Iguazú Falls and had to be nudged for any details. The same was true when the interviewer asked Jennifer to describe one of the occasions in which she enjoyed herself. The interviewer allowed much time for Jennifer to expand on her answers. When it was noted that Jennifer was not going to give more detail, the interviewer tried to help her by asking questions focusing on a possible story line. Although she did use evaluative statements such as *fue increíble* and *me gustó* her quantity of speech per response was low. Jennifer averaged 14 words per response throughout the five-month period, one of the lowest for the group of participants. The general flow of her speech was hindered by an average of 39 hesitations per interview, as shown in Table 4.

**Table 4. Jennifer's Communication Skills over Five Months**

| Month | Fluency                      |                     |                              | Frequency of Functions Attempted |    |    |    |
|-------|------------------------------|---------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------------|----|----|----|
|       | mean # of words per response | # of pauses tallied | # of times struggled tallied | SN                               | SD | DN | DD |
| 1     | 12                           | 61                  | 1                            | 2                                | 2  | 0  | 0  |
| 2     | 14                           | 54                  | 2                            | 1                                | 1  | 0  | 0  |
| 3     | 12                           | 31                  | 0                            | 0                                | 2  | 0  | 0  |
| 4     | 14.9                         | 14                  | 0                            | 0                                | 1  | 0  | 0  |
| 5     | 14.7                         | 33                  | 0                            | 0                                | 1  | 0  | 0  |

*Key: SN=Simple Narration, SD=Simple Description, DN=Detailed Narration, DD=Detailed Description*

This pattern reflected the description for an intermediate-mid speaker that “the smooth incorporation of even basic conversational strategies is often hindered as the speaker struggles to create appropriate language forms” (Byrnes & Canale, 1987: 16). The two excerpts in (8) and (9) are representative of Jennifer’s oral communication, characteristically marked by the brevity of speech.

Development in learners’ OCS is measured in this study by the ability to attempt more difficult functions such as uses of detailed narration and detailed description. Throughout the five interviews, Jennifer preferred to use simple narration and functions normally used by intermediate-level speakers. But the occurrence of the simple narrations and simple descriptions were limited because there were two occurrences of each in month one, one of each in month two, simple descriptions in months three, four and five, and one simple narration in month two.

## **Discussion**

Tom struggled to keep his narratives in the past tense, preferring to avoid the problematic choice between the preterit versus the imperfect aspect by using the present tense. In addition, his utterance lengths and pauses per response showed great variation and not any great improvement during his stay abroad. But Tom did show development in the other areas. In comparison to his performance in his first month abroad, during his last month he produced a good quantity of speech for the tasks asked,

his narratives were coherent and clear starting in his third month abroad, and he preferred to forego simpler narrative strategies for more advanced ones starting in his fourth month abroad. We can conclude that the study abroad experience started to benefit Tom's oral communication skills during his third month abroad.

Mark's OCS developed throughout the study abroad program. First, Mark's flow of speech toward the end of the program was marked with only occasional hesitations as compared to the beginning, in which he hesitated intermittently throughout his interviews. Second, the quantity of his words increased in his responses at the end of the program. Third, he attempted to use an advanced-discourse function toward the middle of the program and became more confident with verb forms. Again, we can conclude that Mark's oral skills were benefited by five months studying abroad. His fluency increased, and he started to move away from using the simpler narrative strategies and began to make an effort to put newly-acquired communication skills to use. Although these attempts were not numerous, we can assume that Mark overcame his insecurities with the language and started to be a moderate risk-taker in practicing the language. As noted by Rubin (1975), "good language learners are willing to guess, willing to appear foolish in order to communicate and willing to use what knowledge they have of the target language in order to create novel utterances." Beebe (1993) termed Rubin's description of a good language learner exhibiting "risk-taking behaviors," which is exactly what Mark showed when he was abroad.

For Jennifer the data show that, although she did not struggle to create appropriate language forms, no development was seen in her OCS. Taking a closer look at Jennifer's data, she did not switch from using the simpler form of narrating and describing to the more complex and detailed form of narrating and describing events. Jennifer's speech flow and quantity of words also remained at the same level throughout the five months; that is, her fluency was characterized with frequent hesitation and brief utterances.

Jennifer's failure to show development in OCS can be explained in the following way. A more detailed narration or description requires more speech than a simple one in order to give more elaborate background information or add evaluative comments. In Jennifer's case, her brief responses did not usually allow for elaboration on any topics. During the

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interviews, she did not seem to treat the interviews as a chance to share her experiences, something that she did do at length in her English written journals, which, toward the end of her stay abroad, were quite negative. Jennifer may have felt that she lacked the vocabulary to express exactly what was on her mind and, instead of trying to circumlocute in order to express these thoughts, she stopped her speech to avoid any difficulty.<sup>7</sup> Jennifer was also sensitive to being rejected by the host culture, and when she did feel rejected, as evidenced by her journal entries, her active participation with native speakers started to dwindle. Naiman, *et al.* (1978) describe this phenomenon. They hypothesize that language learners who are sensitive to rejection may avoid active participation in language class, which translates into less successful language acquisition. We can extend Naiman, *et al.*'s hypothesis to the study abroad environment to explain Jennifer's behavior.

Overall, the data shows that there was no uniform development in the use of more detailed speech functions among the learners. Individual development was seen only in one learner: Tom's narrative skills during his last month abroad were elaborate and detailed. He was able to sustain a conversation with the interviewer and, at times, went into monologue discourse, trying to explain an event that occurred. Mark and Jennifer's speech function stayed constant throughout the program, although Mark attempted to give a detailed narration instead of identifying discrete elements, whereas Jennifer maintained her use of simpler ones. Quantity and flow of speech were the elements of the learners' overall OCS that showed most development over the five-month study abroad period.

### **Conclusion**

The development in the learners' OCS is one of the more complex aspects of language acquisition in which different factors play a role in the variability of learner development. In this study, an attempt was made to measure the oral communication skills of three students over a five month study abroad program. The two facets that were analyzed in measuring the OCS were fluency, (as defined by ACTFL's Proficiency Guidelines), and frequency of attempts at more advanced functions. All three subjects showed an increase in the mean number of words per response, decrease in the number of pauses, and decrease in the number of times struggled with

the language. On the other hand, only one student, Tom, showed an increase in frequency of advanced oral functions, specifically that of detailed narration and description, (again, as defined by ACTFL).

The OCS that were developed in the semester abroad were mostly those corresponding to: 1) uncomplicated, basic communicative tasks, such as a simple narration and description, and 2) increase in utterance length, although speech may be characterized by frequent long pauses since the smooth incorporation of even basic conversational strategies is often hindered as the speaker struggles to create appropriate language forms. Quantity and flow of speech were the elements of the learners' overall OCS that showed most development over the five-month study abroad period. Although the quantity and flow varied greatly among the learners, all showed an increase in quantity. Their speech at the end of the program had more flow with only occasional hesitations as compared to the beginning when there were intermittent hesitations throughout the interviews. Interestingly, these three learners struggled to create appropriate forms in the first two interviews, but by the third interview, there was no noticeable struggle.

This study of the development of oral communication skills, although based on a small sample, illustrates the importance of assessing OCS outcomes at discrete moments in the learning process, and in an ongoing way. Further research, based on larger samples, is needed that traces development of speech functions in the study abroad context, how it happens, and if it requires an extended stay abroad.

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